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ABSTRACT

Described is a program entitled "Creating a Safe Space," designed to remove consciously the major elements which contribute to college students' experiences and feelings that they are victims of extended controls. The course is described as: (1) an experience of both the removal of extended controls and evaluations and the addition of a new instructional system; (2) an instructional system whose core is a list of agreements students publicly commit themselves to before entering the program; and (3) a program whose philosophy incorporates some of the principles of Erhard Seminars Training (EST). (Author/HLM)

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AGREEING TO LEARN

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PROLOGUE: FROM THE GAME OF SCHOOL
TO THE GAME OF est

There is an old game called the game of school. I have played it for the past twenty-six years and I know it well. The minimal pieces necessary in the game are several students and a teacher. Instead of chips or play money, the game of school was A's, B's, C's and D's. When the game is over the players with the most A's are the winners and those with the most D's are the losers. As far as games go this is a good one. There are in finite rules to learn and strategies to implement. For many years I was unaware of the rules or strategies. In fact I did not even know I was playing a game. I translated my C's and D's and occasional B's into statements about my intelligence, creativity and to some degree self-worth. Then a mind boggling thing happened to me. As a senior in high school, my history teacher taught me how to play the game. She taught me the twenty or so words that are typically used by historians, the kind of sentence structure typically used by historians, how historians argue, and how to locate and memorize certain key dates and facts that are so important they could be used in almost any discussion about a variety of historical subjects. I was so startled by what my history teacher told me that I wanted to try out what I learned. Since I was not considered an "advanced" student I was not supposed to be eligible for the "advanced placement" tests given to "advanced" high school students, who, if they did well on the tests, would be given college credit for various history courses

when they entered college. After a great deal of persuading, begging and brown nosing, I was given permission to take the advanced placement history tests. I did reasonably well on those tests and entered the University of Illinois with twelve hours credit in history and three hours credit in College Rhetoric. I want you to know that I am not being modest or cute when I say that all I knew when I took those tests was what my high school history teacher taught me: the twenty or so words that are typically used by historians, the kind of sentence structure used by historians, how historians argue, and how to locate and memorize certain key dates and facts there are so important they could be used in almost any discussion about a variety of historical subjects. I honestly knew almost nothing about those courses for which I received credit.

My awareness of the game of school opened the world to me. For the first time, I knew what I had always suspected to be true; that neither my grades nor those of the students who typically won at the game were indicators of our intelligence, knowledge, creativity or self worth. As an undergraduate, I learned many of the intricate rules and strategies of the game and smugly went out drinking while my friends either stayed home to study or went drinking and often lost at the game. I kept my gamesmanship a guarded secret because I thought that if everyone knew the game as well as I did I would no longer be a winner. Most of my classes were graded on a curve and if we all played the game well our professors would have to change the rules - perhaps in a way that I could not figure out. It was in my best interest to keep the rules to myself.

When I decided to become a teacher I became dedicated to expanding the self concept of those students who were not typically winners.

Consequently I had great success with the "poor" students and did not bother much with the "bright" students or players, if you will. Soon I realized that my bright students were just as affected as anyone else by the discrepancy between their grades and what they learned, and that while the winners went on to "better" jobs, they did not have any more satisfaction from the game than the losers. Furthermore variations of the game of school seemed to manifest themselves out in the world of work and the game of school became the game of work with the same winners and losers and the same shared lack of satisfaction experienced in school.

At this point in my career I became committed to taking the game out of school and replacing it with the satisfaction derived from true learning, whatever that was! I found the teachings of humanistic psychology and humanistic education to deal with the issues of learning and satisfaction in a way that appealed to me and so I became a voracious reader and student in humanistic psychology, humanistic education and experiential learning. My classes became located somewhere in that "appropriate" space between encounter group and the traditional classroom. Both my students and I have derived tremendous value from this type of learning.

In 1976 I took est (erhard seminar training). As a result of my experience I have undergone a dramatic transformation. The value that I and my students have derived from this transformation has spiraled upwards to unimaginable levels. The educational implications of est are revolutionary. How can three hundred people, who never talk one on one to any one except a trainer, and who are together for sixty intensive hours learn so much intellectually and emotionally?? And how is it that the learning

most people experience from est not only lasts for a long time, it also expands! I am just beginning to discover some of the answers to the multitude of questions I have about the educational and psychological implications of est. Much of what I have learned, I have learned from my students in the course, "Mental Hygiene in the Classroom: Creating A Safe Space," described below. (The text for this course is entitled Creating A Safe Space and was written by my students and myself.)

I invite you to experience my description of "Agreeing to Learn" following the first agreement of the course, i.e., rightness and wrongness are not at issue. While I have no need for you to agree that I am "right," my sole purpose is to make a contribution to the way in which you experience. I want to make it clear that the classes I describe are not est, nor does the philosophy and method I use imply an est philosophy or methodology. I take full responsibility for the methodology and philosophy presented in this paper and acknowledge that who I am as a result of experiencing est and its creater Werner Erhard, is profoundly affected by that experience.

Agreeing to Learn[1]

Students in many college settings take minimal responsibility for their learning (Postman and Weingartner, 1971). They often feel as if they are victims of the system. As victims, external forces appear to dictate to students what to study, when to study, how to express what was learned and if it was expressed well enough to be given an "A". A large percentage of students see school as a game which primarily involves getting grades and secondarily involves learning (Millman, et.al., 1978).

The goal in developing the course "Creating A Safe Space" was to consciously remove the major elements which contribute to students' experiencing that they are the victim of external controls. The removal of external controls is not a new or recent educational method (Gross and Gross, 1969). In order for students to accept and experience being responsible for their own learning, in addition to eliminating external controls, a supportive instructional system has to replace the old instructional system. Probably the most successful such system has been developed on an elementary school level by A. S. Neill (Neill, 1960).

The course "Creating A Safe Space" is an experience of both the removal of external controls and evaluating, such as teacher grading and tests, and the addition of a new instructional system intended to support free choice and individual responsibility for learning. The core of the instructional system is a list of agreements students publically commit themselves to before they can take the course (Millman, 1977). Notable among the thirteen agreements are: "Rightness and wrongness will not be

an issue in this class" and "I will be responsible for my own learning" (Millman, 1977). Students are constantly being reminded and confronted by the teacher and fellow students that they are "choosing" to keep the agreements or to break them. It is possible to receive an "A" for this course with little work. While such a possiblity is often difficult for this author's ego, it is necessary for the element of free choice to be authentic and one of the prices one has to pay. I would argue, however, that the student who chooses to get an "easy A" in this course may learn as much as the students who work hard. Furthermore the overwhelming majority of students experience the course with admirable integrity. Much of the instructional system presented in "Creating A Safe Space" is a direct or indirect outgrowth, abstraction or application of the author's personal experience of erhard seminars training (est) (Bry, 1976).

Subjects

The subjects were 240 students from the University of Maryland Baltimore County. These students represent a cross section of students in terms of age, sex, race, major field of study and level of education. The subjects all were participants in an elective educational psychology course at UMBC entitled, "Creating A Safe Space." They were approximately thirty students in each of eight classes.

Procedure

There were five major steps followed in each of the eight classes.

"Step 1"

The first step was to communicate the purpose of the course, namely "to create an experience of choosing personal responsibility for learning."

This step was achieved by means of lecture, discussion and sharing of appropriate life experience (Millman, 1977).

"Step 2"

This step involved creating an atmosphere where students could experience that they were truly taking this class out of personal choice. In order to experience that choice students had to have a clear idea of what they were choosing and that there would be no judgments or making right or wrong whether or not they chose to continue in the course. This step was focused on creating an "atmosphere" for the experience of choice. The actual choice of whether to participate or not would come in another step.

"Step 3"

The third step involved communicating to students that in order to take this class they had to sign twelve non-negotiable agreements. The agreements were non-negotiable because they were necessary for the class to achieve its intended purpose.

"Step 4"

It is in this step that students publicly chose whether or not to sign each agreement - that is, whether or not to choose this class. In this step the agreements were defined, clarified, redefined and reclarified until each student acknowledged that they had a clear enough sense of each agreement so that they could truly choose whether or not to sign them. When clarity was achieved students actually signed the agreements or dropped the course.

"Step 5"

Step number five is the bulk of the semester and includes all that happens from the time students choose whether or not to sign the agreements to the end of the course. The main focus of the course is the agreements. That is, what we talk about in class is not as important as is the way we experience how we keep or break the agreements during the process of talking. Coping with freedom of choice and responsibility and overcoming past conditioning have been a major issue, taking considerable class time, and causing intense self evaluation, in each class.

Results or Findings

Seventy percent of 240 students in annonymous course evaluations have called this course the "best," "most important" or "most valuable" learning experience in their career as students. The course has a good reputation and is filled within the first hour of registration. As a result of the experience many students have said that they learned to take responsibility for their learning in other courses, and many students have attributed getting better grades to their experience of "Creating A Safe Space." Many students have said that their self concept has been enhanced as a result of discovering that much of school is a game that they do not play well and that playing the game poorly is not an indication of low intelligence. Other students having discovered the "game" aspect of school report that they can choose to play the game and they play it better as a result of choosing. There is little or no drop-out rate in this course and students report that their learning stays with them and contributes to future learning in other areas of their lives.

Implications

The implications of this course are numerous and far reaching. Some of the implications are the following:

1. Removal of external controls may be a pre-requisite for students to experience the joy of being responsible for their own learning. (Leonard, 1968)

2. Emotional and intellectual learning are parts of a whole and in order for students to experience their wholeness a revolution of sorts in instructional systems may be necessary. (Brown, 1971)

3. The processing of learning may be the key to experiencing the higher levels of knowing. (Jones, 1968).

4. Schools now are designed for the majority to fail and as such contribute to a majority showing a low self-concept. (Glasser, 1969)

5. An effective instructional system which supports free choice and individual responsibility for learning may be abstracted from est (erhard seminars training). (Fuller and Wallace, 1975)

6. Resistance may be a necessary pre-requisite for learning. (Yalom, 1975)

7. Large groups when instructed via the system implied here may support higher levels of learning more than would be experienced in the smaller groups often called for by current pedagogical theorists.

AGREEMENTS FOR MENTAL HYGIENE IN THE CLASSROOM

A. All Students

1. I will accept full responsibility for my learning in this class.

2. I will commit myself to creating a safe space for learning.

3. Rightness and wrongness will not be at issue.

4. I will use my experience of others as an opportunity to experience myself.

5. It's ok for me and/or others to experiment with new behavior, always taking into account the safety and rights of others.

6. I intend to attend all classes and if I miss more than three I will either drop the course or come to an acceptable agreement with Howie based on the traditional game of school.

7. I agree to respect the confidentiality of each person in class. I will not discuss class in a way that could reveal the identity of someone other than me (unless I get permission from the other person to do so).

8. I acknowledge that any person in this class could be its teacher and I choose to experience Howie as teacher.

9. I will read the textbook, Creating A Safe Space.

10. I will not smoke, eat or drink in class.

B. "B" Students

11. I will find at least twelve quotes from a culture other than western culture and relate the quotes to my experience of this class. (The topics to choose from will be given later.) Due Date: March 21 or 22.

C. "A" Students

12. I will write a paper (approximately 10 pages-typed) in a style and on a topic to be determined.

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